

ANGLO-AMERICAN LITERATURE.

[The *Literary World* makes a few running comments upon, and extracts from Philarete Chasles's new book on this country, just translated from the French, and published by Scribner of New York, which we transfer to our columns.]

No one can deny that the French writers who have directed their attention to this country, have honestly addressed themselves to the business of understanding our peculiarities *from within*. They have sought the centre and heart of our institutions, in order to determine the physiology of our institutions and customs. Among foreign journalists, M. Chasles, the distinguished Professor in the College of France, is the most rapid, brilliant, and sympathetic of all who have subjected our young literature to critical examination.

He derives his conclusions from no transient and temporary survey, but from a patient induction of as many facts as he could command. In these conclusions we cannot always concur; but we must acknowledge that in many of them he is more American than Americans, and consequently more right in his judgments than the majority of indigenous critics. It is true that he attaches more significance to casual and incidental ascendancy in some cases, and in others mistakes crudeness and extravagance—individual to the writers whom he discusses—further than the facts would warrant.

Several of M. Chasles's critical papers—which help to make up the present volume—we have heretofore reproduced in the *Literary World*, so that our readers are already acquainted with the method and treatment of the eminent French critic. The author's "Preliminary Notice" to the collection, announces his object, with a just reference to others of his contemporaries who

have discussed American life from a different point of view:—

"This volume contains several 'studies' on North America, and the development of literature and manners there. You will find here no pretension to direct the age, nor to preach new doctrines—a merit, by the way, sufficiently rare in these times.

"The Americans of the United States, last-born of the great Anglo-Saxon race, and founders of the federal republic of the United States, have conquered, in the civilized world, a place which does not permit the observer to pass them by in silence.

"For a scientific analysis of their institutions, I refer the reader to the excellent works of M. de Tocqueville and of M. Michael Chevalier. My object is different. I propose to exhibit, in a series of faithful pictures, the details of manners, traits of character, phenomena and singularity, observed upon the spot by foreign travellers, or shown forth by Americans themselves."

At the very opening, M. Chasles disposes of the high claim of American literature, in sentences like these:—

"And as it is impossible for a man without remembrance to have imagination, so that intellectual quality cannot belong to a people born yesterday, whose whole Past dates from yesterday. The United States of America, for so many reasons remarkable and grand, are essentially modern; their genius is material and mechanic; their force lies in their good sense, their patient observation and industry. It is—as we have just said—a country without imagination, because without memories. Countries grown old in sorrow, Ireland, Scotland, for instance, lend much to the imagination. They have bought that brilliant faculty dear; not a castle whose walls are not blood-stained, whose legend does not tell of a murder; not a fortress whose echoes do not bring to you from afar the sound of violence; the atmosphere of the Gaelic hills is peopled with phantoms, every lake has its fay, every cavern its enchanter; the shadow of Bruce wanders through those sombre chapels; the name of Wallace sounds with the sough of the wind through these ruined arches.

"The United States, by a phenomenon which we have just explained, wants that dawn and penumbra which give perspective. The very tongue is not native to the soil; it has crossed the sea, and naturalized itself on that side the ocean. To preserve the purity of their style, American writers are forced to keep their regards constantly fixed upon the mother country, where are found their types and their models. If they innovate, they fear vulgarity or emphasis. In this respect they are like those modern writers who use a dead language, and fancy that they can thus restore to us Cicero, Demosthenes, Livy; forgetting that it is the social life of a people which gives energy and life to a language, and that an idiom detached from national society and manners, is a branch detached from the tree, and deprived of its sap. Scotland, even, is proud of her dialect: she has her poet Burns, whose inspiration was at once extinguished when he became unfaithful to the patois of his province."

This—we submit—with due deference to the distinguished commentator, is altogether too summary; he forgets that, although we may want the perspective of history, it is the very province of genius to supply that perspective from itself. In the pictures of Hogarth, for example, which treat of immediate, every-day London life, does he not recollect the air of distance bestowed on a familiar street view—such as the Election Scene, with the half-seen procession passing on the other side of the wall? It is this very imagination which does the work of history: to say that imagination is not employed in American works is, therefore, merely to say that the writers of such works do not possess imagination—no more. Setting out with this destructive postulate, M. Chasles dispatches in rapid succession various classes of American authors, from the colonial period down to the present day.

His effort at finding philosophy in everything, is exemplified in the reason which he gives for Brockden Brown's superfluous horrors—"American society has nothing fantastic in it."

"He understood and could express passion. Instead of yielding to the timid scruples of his compatriots, he braved criticism and only looked for effect; effect, factitious and exaggerated. Brown's demons are false demons; his monsters result from predetermined; his efforts of imagination are the struggles of an intelligence which wishes to create but which produces chimeras. There is a ridiculous super-excitement in these productions; all is forced, violent, incoherent. Nothing spontaneous, natural, simple; but always convulsions, perpetual emphasis, and horrors crowded upon horrors.

"Whence comes this vehement exaggeration? Why this unheard of tendency to the pathetic, the immense, the romantic, fantastic, marvellous? Because American society has nothing fantastic in it; the drama and the dithyrambic are exotics in the United States. Brown is already forgotten. It is the inevitable fate of all *outré* literature. False colors soon fade; their own exaggeration destroys them."

Washington Irving, with a hit or two at his Anglicism, is dwelt upon approvingly:—

"The most lovable works of Irving are those in which the delicate observation of his youth is naively set forth. His satiric *History of New York* by Diedrich Knickerbocker, a parody on the Dutch minuteness, and the microscopic importance claimed for themselves by the very little—the *Sketch Book*, *Bracebridge Hall*, and the *Tales of a Traveller*—works which will remain, and which, indeed, are refined continuations of the style of Addison—constitute what one may call Irving's first manner. Criticism had accused him of feebleness; he wished to rise higher, and wrote the *History of Christopher Columbus*, and that of his companions—that of the Conquest of Grenada, and at last the *Alhambra*. In this second manner there is a little too high coloring and emphasis; but the research is conscientious and the style brilliant."

A peculiarity of Cooper is pointedly sketched in the following:—

"The author is as if in a jury-box, he tells the truth, and nothing but the truth. If two foemen

fight with fierce rage upon the edge of a precipice, if there be between them issues of life and death, Cooper tells you the color of the rock; how many feet it rises above the level of the sea; whether it be of silex or granite; what plants grow there; what birds build there; its latitude. Another would be content to set forth the vicissitudes of the combat, the convulsions of suffering, the triumph, the agony. But this is not enough for Cooper. Every muscle of the combatants must be visible; he shows his subject not merely naked, but skinned.

"If such a system were to prevail, a grain of sand or a butterfly's wing would serve as a text for volumes; there is no reason why authors should ever stop in their descriptions."

In a chapter on "certain American novelists and travellers," this characterization is given of Mr. Mathews's "*Puffer Hopkins*," which, in its irony as an index of a phase of American civilization, reminds the writer of "*Roman Gaul*":—

"This irony in the United States is still very rude; it will become refined, but at present it is singularly bitter and coarse. Readers upon this side of the Atlantic can only feel disgust for the odious scenes written by two satiric painters of manners, Messrs. Moore and Mathews, authors of *Tom Stapleton* and *Puffer Hopkins*. I read eagerly these sketches of American life by Americans. The impression is a mournful one; it is not popular, but low and aristocratic in the worst sense of that word; faded and corrupted vices, without grace or taste; a coward life which pursues titles, envies fortune, rushes upon success. These manners are destitute of purity, passion, simplicity, elegance, or greatness—'tis the lowest shopkeeper of Whitehall, transported into gilded drawing-rooms, and clumsily borrowing the upper vices without forgetting or losing the baser. It is no longer Washington; it has not become Horace Walpole. I cannot express the disdain and grief produced by these crazy and brutal manners, which belong by their impurity to the scandalous boudoirs of the old world, and smell of the bar-room while claiming to be aristocratic."

The satiric point of that much talked-of book, *Puffer Hopkins*, has not escaped M. Chasles. He does injustice to its general spirit, however. Had he at the time been acquainted, as we have reason to know he has since become, with Mr. Mathews's other writings, he would have formed a fairer idea of the book he has noticed. It possesses many high qualities which the author has since more maturely developed; but in its best descriptions, its pictures of feeling and fancy, it is widely separable from the transient literature with which M. Chasles confounds it. He appears to have received, at the time of writing these criticisms, a budget of the cheap pamphlet publications of the hour, a form into which the exigenices of the trade drove alike some of the best and worst productions of the time. The dingy paper and close type of the *Brother Jonathan* editions would hardly recommend the contents of a pamphlet to the cultivated and luxurious book-tastes of the Parisian. We trust M. Chasles may yet avail himself of some opportunity to present a

fairer, because fuller, view of Mr. Mathew's different productions.

We have been struck with the zeal displayed by M. Chasles, in keeping himself "up" in the current American literature. He receives and imparts a suggestion with infinite readiness. He has his eye, for instance, upon "local archeology."—"No fraction of the United States," says he, "so small as not to have a historian; no city so small as not to become visible in octavo or quarto, with engravings." This glimpse, too, is from the life—"The European literature is curiously treated in the United States. In the scarcely cleared regions of the West, traversed by the railroad, children haunt the stations, shrieking out 'New novel by Paul de Kock, sir?' or some other such matter."

In fine, M. Chasles's volume is eminently readable—none perhaps the less for its French characteristic of eager generalizing, which refreshes the, to cis-Atlantic readers, somewhat worn topics. It is an excellent corrective in its frank, off-hand, suggestive way of the prevalent spirit of puffery, and we should add is generally well presented, with life and spirit in its English dress, by the translator, Mr. Donald McLeod.